



SEARCH FOR ENLIGHTENMENT – HERMANN HESSE'S SIDDHARTHA AND THE JOURNEY TO THE EAST.

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Hermann Hesse (1877-1962) is one of the greatest German novelist, poet and painter of New Age. His novels have resonated with countless generations and inspires a host of young readers. Born in the Swabian town of Calw in 1877, he ranks as one of the most widely read German-speaking authors of the 20th century. Majority of his books have been translated into more than 60 languages and approximately 150 million copies of his works are in circulation around the globe. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1946 –

The main theme of his work is the individual's efforts to break out of the established modes of civilization so as to find an essential spirit and identity. (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hermann-Hesse>)

He is an author who focuses on the anguish of self-analysis and is continuously searching for his own true identity. Consequently, distinguished as one of the finest and most influential writers, he fits into the set of writers who were largely disillusioned by proceedings around them during the 20th century. Most of his writings discuss a deep yearning for the departed era of romanticism and express his spiritual turmoil, that is deeply rooted in the pathos of the modern age as it is slowly losing its association with the inner-self. Nonetheless regardless of this, he provided his readers the concept of an ideal world which can be seen as the remainder of the Romantic School of thought. It seems that, he concentrates on the three stages of development of human life, which begins with childhood innocence, moving on to experience and later comes back to innocence. But this chronology may not be relevant in the modern age, especially with the world that is left confounded and distressed after the two World Wars. He believes that the people born during or after the great wars are not likely to gain the 'pre-WWI innocence' and therefore are 'confronted with the necessity to make free choices and judgments' in their second stage of life. Almost all of his novels dealt with this theme. As the world was still recuperating from the wreckage of the Wars, his characters search for the meaning of life which demand the rejection of the conventional paths to peace.

In his biography, *Hermann Hesse. Der Wanderer und sein Schatten* (Hermann Hesse. The Wanderer and his Shadow – Hanser, Munich, 2012), Gunnar Decker tells us about this legendary author with a great sympathy but without romanticizing. He also views him from a critical distance, without being arrogant. He says –

This unmistakable figure in his straw hat, is anything but the simple, easy-going, companionable fellow he may appear; no carefree vagabond wanderer he. This is a notoriously irascible loner, one who can only endure other people – including his own wives – from a respectable distance. Physical contact is as anathema to him as unannounced visitors. Inner harmony eludes him, although he constantly evokes it with Goethe. His life is one of constant swings; phases of intense creativity alternating with periods of deep depression.

Gunnar Decker thus introduces us to a man torn, a nomad who searched all his life for inner harmony but was pursued by his own shadowy demon of self-destruction. Hesse's life and literary works are characterized by a constant preoccupation with the questions of religion and faith. He was born into a Protestant-Pietist family of missionaries, preachers and theologians against whose rigour and strictness he soon rebelled. His parents also served as Protestant missionaries to India. Nevertheless, his father's and grandfather's missionary work in India intended that he was exposed to Hinduism and Buddhism and later on he went on to explore Chinese Taoism. He says –

Of the Western philosophers, I have been influenced most by Plato, Spinoza, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche as well as the historian Jacob Burckhardt. But they did not influence me as much as Indian and, later, Chinese philosophy.

(From *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967*, Editor Horst Frenz, Elsevier Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1969)

Yet this path did not cause him to renounce Christianity. On the contrary, he developed the notion of a synthesis between the religions on the basis of a

universal mysticism. He was, in fact, seeking to unite peoples, he wanted to be a connecting bridge between East and West. His *Siddhartha* (1922) and *The Journey to East*, (1932) are the proof of his literary testimony to the lifelong search for a God. Hesse believed in a religion outside, between and above confessions, which is indestructible. Hitherto he always took a very skeptical view of dogmas and teachings. He writes –

I believe one religion is as good as the other; there is none in which one could not become a sage, and none in which one could not just as easily engage in the inane form of idolatry.

He has a wide appeal to the readers as his works have a spiritual message for today's generation. Gunnar Decker says –

He questioned autonomy and religion. He searched for a religious doctrine that was not militant or missionary, but open to other lifestyles, other ideas.

After World War II, Hesse's books were very popular in Germany as the country wanted a source of direction and self-reflection. It was during the war that he wrote his last excessive work, *The Glass Bead Game*, which won him the 1946 Nobel Prize for Literature. At the time, the Nobel committee said that the prize was for his inspired writings which, while growing in boldness and penetration, exemplify the classical humanitarian ideals and the high art of style.

Siddhartha is one of the greatest and finest product of Hesse's so-called psychoanalytic period. Begun in 1919, First Part is dedicated to Romain Rolland and the book's composition spanned nearly three years. The second is dedicated to his cousin Wilhelm Gundert and was written during 1919-20 while the rest was completed eighteen months later. The entire work is loosely based on the life of Gautama Buddha. However, it also bears a relationship to Hesse's own life. Like *Siddhartha*, Hesse decided to choose another career than that which his father suggested. In the novel, *Siddhartha* the main protagonist, leaves the strict bonds of his Brahmin father to seek his own salvation. Hesse himself had left the strict bonds of his Pietist-Lutheran father to become a writer. Simultaneously we can also observe many similarities between Hesse's *Siddhartha* and the actual Buddha. *Siddhartha*, like Buddha is an outstanding pupil and athlete. *Siddhartha* leaves his wife and unborn son for the life of an ascetic, as did Buddha. And just like Buddha he practiced yoga and meditated by the side of a river. In both cases, it is beneath the tree by a river that the vision of all previous existences emerged in a revelation. Consequently, both men, by attaining *Nirvana*, were liberated from the vicious circle of life and death and thereby attained salvation.

The Christian influence on *Siddhartha* may not be immediately obvious, but it is, nevertheless, unmistakable. To attain salvation, *Siddhartha* must once again regain his innocence, becoming once again as a little child before entering the Gates of Heaven. Herein lies the perfect resolution of the novel. Throughout the various stages of his journey, *Siddhartha* discovers something of value in everyone he interacts with and each stage brings him closer to his ultimate goal.

Siddhartha learned something new on every step of his path, for the world was transformed, and his heart was enchanted. (P-48)

Through well-designed and deeply evocative writing, Hesse demonstrates, through *Siddhartha*'s journey, the fundamental value of each and every person on Earth. Everyone has something special to contribute to the universe. Accordingly, *Siddhartha*'s final realization of his goal of finding enlightenment is simply amazing.

No doubt, the truth for which *Siddhartha* and Govinda searching is a universal understanding of life or *Nirvana*. *Siddhartha* and Govinda both have a fundamental desire to understand their lives through spirituality, but they differ in their willingness to do what they must do for their search for the truth. During the search, *Siddhartha* becomes suspicious that one path may lead to dead end and thus he quickly alters his course. He willingly abandons the path of the *Brahmin* for the path of the *Samanas*, then abandons the *Samanas* for *Gotama*, and then to make a sweeping departure from spiritual teachers and search and

enters the material world with Kamala and Kamaswami. He never halts his search and continues to follow different paths till he reaches *Nirvana*.

While on the other hand Govinda, is much less flexible in his quest for spiritual enlightenment. In his quest, he restricts himself to the spiritual and religious world and persists in his need for teachers. While Siddhartha is willing to break the religious conviction and also abandon all his training, Govinda is willing to seek truth only as long as it appears within the narrow confines of Hinduism or Buddhism and is transmitted by a respected teacher. As a result, Govinda is unable to see the truth around him, subsequently he is limited by his belief that truth will appear in the way he has been taught by his teachers. This distinction between Siddhartha's inexorable search and Govinda's inadequate search is the reason why Govinda can attain enlightenment only through an act of grace on Siddhartha's part, whereas Siddhartha is able to find truth through his own powers.

In life we are all looking for meaning, we are all looking for something to give us a purpose and, in essence, a reason to actually be alive. Through the quest we proclaim to find our own peace. Siddhartha while followed the teachings of others feels that, it granted him little or no happiness. His meeting with Buddha makes him realise that the only way he can achieve Buddha's degree of serenity and tranquillity is to find it himself. Consequently, he takes his own path, although an indirect one, and finally awakens his mind into a sense of enlightenment. Nevertheless, in order to do so, he must first realise the true state of emptiness. And, of course, to understand emptiness one must first experience momentary fullness. Accordingly, he walks into the world of the everyday man. He indulges in their desire and pleasure, he also gains belongings and also takes a love, forms attachments and gets a household of servants and also accumulates wealth -

Siddharth had learned to trade, to use his power over others, to enjoy himself with women, he had learned to wear beautiful clothes, to give order to servants these people were all the time in love with themselves..... (p 27)

Through experiencing all such things, he learns that they are shallow and temporary, it became clear to him that *lust was akin to death*. It will never create the feeling of lasting happiness within his soul, so he walks out once more with the full realisation that peace can only come from one place and that is from within -

I have had to experience so much stupidity, so many vices, so much error, so much nausea, disillusionment and sorrow, just in order to become a child again and begin anew. I had to experience despair, I had to sink to the greatest mental depths, to thoughts of suicide, in order to experience grace.

He experiences oneness with his own thoughts, with everyone else and anything that resides in nature and thus becomes enlightened. Suffering exists, suffering will always exist, and it is how we deal with this suffering that defines us and it is how we pick ourselves up later on not letting it ruin our lives, and those around us, that makes us stronger. In this Hesse capture something extremely difficult to put into words, which is something the novel frequently recognises. Happiness is not equitable with materialism, and to make us realise that seeking something too ardently may mean we miss it altogether. He realises that all our pursuits are temporary and doomed to fail. Materialism does not ultimately equate to happiness nonetheless. Besides it can be a stage of learning and growth. No doubt inner peace and joy is with us always but we are not consistently aware of it. Sometimes a spiritual awakening allows this light of joy to temporarily shine through and we become aware of the enlightenment that was, and is, always there. Seeking the meaning of life is not the answer, living life, the life of peace and compassion is. Siddhartha follows the vibrations of his soul, the sound of the river, and it takes him exactly where he needs to go. In this book the writer cuts through all the rhetoric, the arguments and debates, and gets to the very heart of the matter itself.

The perception of *Om*, which signifies the oneness and unity of all things, marks the main moments of awakening for Siddhartha. Siddhartha's ability to finally grasp *Om* is his entrance into enlightenment, but along the way he encounters the idea a number of times, each time sparking a change within him. He first encounters *Om* was as he trained in rituals as a Brahmin. He realizes that though he has been taught what *Om* should mean, none of those around him have fully reached a full understanding of it in their own lives. People who chant the word and understand the concept intellectually surround him, but their lives do not reflect the enlightenment that comes from fully embracing the energy, dynamism and vibration of *Om*. He hears *Om* again when he stands near the river considering suicide. Realizing that life itself is imperishable, he must learn to just BE not try to force his life along specific paths. Essentially, he is trying to merge with *Om*, which he recognizes as being all around him, rather than continuously search for a philosophy that accesses it on an intellectual basis. Here it seems that the river suggests this battle visually as the opposing banks represent the polarities, and the river itself represents the ideal union of them. Siddhartha finds enlightenment only when he understands *Om*, the unity of polarities -

And in the moment when the sound of Om touched Siddhartha's ear, his

dormant spirit suddenly woke up and realised the foolishness of his actions....when the Om entered his consciousness : He became aware of himself in his misery and his error.....Om! as he spoke to himselfhe knew about Brahman, knew about the indestructibility of life, knew about all that is divine, which he had forgotten. (p 84)

Complete entry and submergence into *Om*, into the nameless, the perfect makes him achieve the transcendence where he can accept that all is false and true at the same time, that all is living and dead at the same moment, and that all possibilities are united in the spirit of the universe.

His meeting with the ferryman Vasudeva is equally interesting. He finds in Vasudeva a great listener. He learns many things from his and the most important of all was, the art of listening and the secret of the river -

....the river is everywhere at once, at the source and at the mouth, at the waterfall, at the ferry, at the rapids, in the sea, in the mountain, everywhere at once, and that there is only the present time for it, not the shadow of the past, not the shadow of the future? (p 104)

And here he meets Kamala again and also his son. Kamala asks him -

You have achieved it? you have found peace? (p 110)

Kamala dies a peaceful death their son now with Siddharth. He wants his son to understand him, to accept his love or perhaps to reciprocate, but he fails in his attempt. In due course, he realises that his blind love for his son was a passion, something very human - it was *Samsara*. And then one day the boy runs away, he follows him but without success. The wound still burning in his heart he sees Brahman in each passion that humans experience. As he is going by the river to search his son, he sees his face in the river, his face reminds him of his father's face, the *Brahman*. And he remembers his own farewell to his father. Now after so many years the same is happening to him. The river telling the story and suffering of his father, of his son and of himself. These images along with images of Govinda, Kamala and others merging with each other and into each other. Yet again he can listen to the sound of *Om* floating in the air over all the voices of the river. He finds the *his self had flown into the oneness*. Vasudeva is a person who has already reached enlightenment and is content to take people across the river. In Hindu Culture Vasudeva is the name given to Vishnu. Vishnu is the supreme *Brahman*, he is the one who dwells in all beings and in whom all beings dwell.

यत्तत्त्वगुणं स्वच्छं शान्तं भगवतः पदम् ।
यदाहर्षमुदेवाख्यं चित्तं तन्महात्मकम् ॥21॥
yat tat sattva-guṇaṁ svaccharṁ
śāntam bhagavataḥ padam
yad āhur vāsudevākhyam
cittam tan mahad-ātmakam

(The mode of goodness, which is the clear, sober status of understanding the Personality of Godhead and which is generally called Vasudeva, or consciousness, becomes manifest in the mahat-tattva. SB 3.26.21)

As Siddharth, the protagonist attains the supreme bliss, we see Vasudev merging with the infinite, his steps full of peace, his head full of lustre, his body full of light.

At the end of the novel, the more he listens to the river, the more he becomes aware of the complexity of *Om* and how it involves not only the physical and spiritual world but also time itself. This sound of *Om* signals the true beginning of his life -- the beginning of suffering, denunciation, peace and finally wisdom. When he finally comprehends the word in its entirety and understands that all things exist at the same moment, all possibilities are real and valid, and time itself is empty, he finally achieves enlightenment.

The other short novel of Hermann Hesse *The Journey to the East* was published in 1943, it was as such written as a preliminary study to his final masterpiece *The Glass Bead Game*, shortly after this he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature (1946). The story of the novel is narrated by H.H and it is the tale of a philosophical sect called the League which including writers, musicians and artists, who travel through space and time, meeting illustrious personages both imaginary and real - including Plato, Mozart, Paul Klee, Baudelaire, in search of the ultimate truth during the aftermath of the World War. The novel explores themes of service, leadership, the contemplative life. The difficult tasks historians face while interpreting the novel is its setting - set against the backdrop of a mystic journey whose destination becomes increasingly unclear. It is believed that H.H. stands for Hermann Hesse and that H.H.'s venture is a metaphor both for Hesse's life and for his writing, including the novel in which H.H. appears. No doubt the novel is about Hermann Hesse's deep personal experiences and inward journey. It's a mysterious novel, with its deceptively simple narrative structure and it lends to multiple interpretations.

The narrator of the story H.H. member of the mysterious League, describes himself as a violinist and a storyteller. The novel begins with H.H. announcing

his intention to recreate in writing a fabulous Journey to the East which he undertook as a member of the League. The aims of the League no doubt is ambiguous, besides H.H. is bound by a vow of silence, that is to say he cannot disclose the League's purpose. Nevertheless, he is determined to give an accurate historical account of the Journey. Subsequently describing his initiation into the League and the formation of the group with which he would travel, H.H. quickly grows uncertain of himself and his writing. As he tries to remember what befell the group, he describes the story he has to tell as incomprehensible and gibberish. It is more difficult to remember what happened than he had anticipated, despite his constant assertions that the Journey was the most precious and unforgettable time of his life.

Although it is called the *Journey to the East*, the group's destination is unknown.

We not only wandered through space, but also through time. We moved towards the east, but we also travelled into the Middle Ages and the Golden Ages (p 50, *The Journey to the East*)

As they travel, there is initially a sense that the group is moving eastward, but then again H.H. is soon claiming that the Journey takes them through time and space, as well as geography. The group meets figures from Hesse's novels and also characters from other works of fiction, such as Don Quixote, childhood friends, and people who have died. H.H. states that each member of the group has a different goal, but the pursuit of each goal will lead to the success of the group's ultimate goal: the East. The book can be read as a meditation on the creative process, or more specifically, the act of writing a novel or reconstructing a history contingent on memory as a metaphor for a journey.

The group's first difficulty proves to be its last. A servant named Leo vanishes and as soon as he is gone, each member of the group places more and more importance on Leo. It seems that his disappearance makes the group realise that his presence is essential for the quest. The group members begin to blame each other for his disappearance, and H.H. starts to doubt the purpose of his quest. Ultimately the group disperses and H.H. returns to normal life. But as anguish and uncertainty overtake him and unforeseen hitches and complications meet his attempts to refabricate the Journey in writing, he convinces himself that his life has no purpose, and that the League is disbanded, if in fact, it ever existed. Late in the book, a chance encounter with Leo leads to H.H. being summoned before the High Throne in order to be judged. Near the end of the book, H.H. is stunned to learn that Leo whom all thought to be a servant is actually the President of the League. He recalls what Leo once said to him: 'He who wishes to live long must serve'. Leo also calls this precept the 'Law of service', and says that 'he who wishes to rule does not live long'. This statement leads H.H. to wonder why anyone would ever want to rule, if ruling, or becoming a master, is a negation of immortality. As Leo vanished the whole unity is perplexed and shattered. The writer says that just as Roman collapsed after Caesar's death the league broke up on the unhappy day of Morbio. Now he must read about himself in the League archives and learn the truth about himself. When he does this, he realizes that he must disappear in order for Leo to grow. As the novel concludes, H.H. is looking for a place to lie down and sleep.

I now saw the double figure representing Leo and myself, not only becoming clearer and each image more alike, but I also saw something moving, slowly, extremely slowly, in the same way that a snake moves which has fallen asleep. Something was taking place there, something like a very slow, smooth but continuous flowing or melting; indeed, something melted or poured across from my image to that of Leo's. I perceived that my image was in the process of adding to and flowing into Leo's, nourishing and strengthening it. It seemed that, in time, all the substance from one image would flow into the other and only one would remain: Leo. He must grow, I must disappear.

As I stood there and looked and tried to understand what I saw, I recalled a short conversation that I had once had with Leo during the festive days at Bremgarten. We had talked about the creations of poetry being more vivid and real than the poets themselves. The candles burned low and went out. I was overcome by an infinite weariness and desire to sleep, and I turned away to find a place where I could lie down and sleep. (p 108)

And consequently, the ultimate truth is finally revealed to H.H., he understands that he must yield, submit, even die unto that unifying, continuously flowing substance, personified by the humble servant and President Leo. It is only through amenity, faith, humility and the transcendence of individual ego can there ever be an awakening of the "home and youth of the soul", thus releasing H.H. from the depths of utter anguish and despair. This realisation leads him back towards the East, towards the Light, towards Home.

The East can be seen as a geographical location or as a variety of metaphors for a lofty goal –

Our goal was not only the East, or rather the East was not only a country and something geographical, but it was the home and youth of the soul, it was everywhere and nowhere, it was the union of all times (p 50).

Its status as an actual location is difficult to sustain. Facing eastward and beginning to walk is not a guarantee of eventually reaching concepts such as the 'youth of the soul' or arriving 'everywhere and nowhere'. Peter Roberts in his research paper says that –

*There has been much debate over the meaning of the 'East' in *The Journey to the East*, but rather less attention has been paid to the other key word in the title. One of the keys to understanding this enigmatic novel, I think, lies in the word 'journey'. The fact that it is a journey and not, for example, an arrival, is itself of significance – especially from an educational point of view. For the idea of a journey suggests the possibility of learning – and in this case, of lifelong learning. For Hesse, this journey never ends. We never quite reach the point at which we can declare, comfortably and permanently, 'I am now home; there is nothing more for me to do'. Hesse himself, even while living in self-imposed relative seclusion, never believed he reached this point and remained a restless being until his death. This was not contrary to his mature conception of spiritual fulfilment and self-understanding but, as *The Glass Bead Game* shows, utterly consistent with it. It will, Hesse believed, always be necessary to keep reflecting and learning, and doubts, questions and critique are fundamentally important in this educational process.*

(Published in: Paideusis: International Journal in Philosophy of Education, vol.17, no.1, 2008, pp. 45-58. *The Dream of a Journey to the East: Mystery, Ritual and Education in Hermann Hesse's Penultimate Novel*)

Timothy Leary, a well-known American psychologist and author calls him a poet of the interior journey. He says –

Hesse reminds us, stay close to the internal core. The mystic formulas, the league, the staggeringly rich intellectual potentials and deadening traps if the internal flame is not kept burning. The flame is always there, within and without, surrounding us, keeping us alive. Our only task is to keep turned in.

(<http://www.gss.ucsb.edu/projects/hesse/papers/documents/Leary-The-Politics.pdf>)

As one of the greatest exponents of the individual's search for authenticity, spirituality and self-knowledge, Hermann Hesse utilizes his surreal, parallel-world exposition to explore the relationship between illusion and reality, dream and memory and, in particular, the definite and indefinite as expressed through the power of words. He is a popular with today's generation as the youth of today identifies with his alienated protagonists.

Thus, in both the above novels we see a spiritual quest. It narrates the process of profound inner awakening, shifting from one state of consciousness to another. Spiritual journeys are undertaken by both the protagonist who are searching for meaning and purpose in their lives through self-discover. They are facing a crossroads, wanting to reconnect with the natural environment through understanding, inter-connectivity with the earth and global consciousness on a deeper level. This quest cannot be bought or gifted, it can only be experienced and discovered by the individual. When one steps out of one's comfort zone, away from the pressures of modern living, and consciously explore other lands, cultures and beliefs systems, the spiritual growth is guaranteed. Focusing on the journey rather than the destination, the journey ultimately leads to the destination. Traveling consciously, with intention, respect, an open mind the protagonist rediscover themselves. The journey is not just external, but it is an internal and eternal journey through time and space in search of ultimate truth. Here enlightenment is not detachment from material, fleshed lives, it is acceptance and refinement of the humanity that ultimately liberates the spirit. Both the books are beautifully written ethical allegories, telling us that the ultimate truth is that everything is an illusion. An illusion that needs to be subsisted and experienced in order to find out the absolute truth. Which is nothing but an awakened consciousness unrestricted by all beliefs, limits, boundaries and miseries. The absolute Ecstasy of nothingness in Oneness. The final message is beautifully captured in these lines –

On A Journey

Don't be downcast, soon the night will come,
When we can see the cool moon laughing in secret
Over the faint countryside,
And we rest, hand in hand.

Don't be downcast, the time will soon come
When we can have rest. Our small crosses will stand
On the bright edge of the road together,
And rain fall, and snow fall,
And the winds come and go.

(Translated by James Wright Hermann Hesse)
(<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/on-a-journey/>)

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